

The Bolshevik Heritage

(Economic and Political Weekly, November 4, 2017; Special Issue)

Dilip Simeon

*Our Party, like any other political party, is striving after political domination for itself.
Our aim is the dictatorship of the revolutionary proletariat.* V.I. Lenin, 1917

For what is most terrible in it (communism) is the mixture of truth and falsehood.
Nikolai Berdyaev, 1931

The process of shift in meaning is never concluded, because, in history, it is never determined at the beginning what will result at the end. Karl Lowith, 1941 ¹

The Rupture: August 23, 1793 (when France's Committee of Public Safety adopted universal conscription); and October 25, (November 7) 1917, are dates which represent the essence of the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution respectively. They also mark the difference in their orientation and significance. The big difference between the French and Russian revolutions was this: the first converted civil war into national war; the second converted national war into civil war. The extreme wing of the French revolutionaries exercised power during the counter-revolutionary upsurge of the Vendee. The suppression of peasant resistance (1793-94) was coterminous with the *levee-en-masse* and the Jacobin dictatorship. The combination of these factors channelled the forces unleashed in 1789 into patriotic mobilisation for international war. The violence of the Bolsheviks, on the other hand, was directed at enemies within Russia, those deemed to represent the ruling class and its allies.

The Bolshevik revolution owed its very origin to the conversion of international war – imperialist war in Lenin's words - into civil war. The outstanding features of Bolshevism were its unwavering demand for Russia's exit from the world war; and the conviction that a Bolshevik seizure of power would herald world revolution. This stance was

¹The head citations are from On Compromises, V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, (hereafter *CW*) Progress Publishers Moscow, 1974; vol 25, p 310; Nikolai Berdyaev, http://www.krotov.info/library/02_b/berdyaev/1931_eng.htm;

The *Religion of Communism*; 1931, accessed October 22 2017; and Karl Lowith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: the revolution in nineteenth-century thought*; Columbia University Press, New York, 1964; p. vi. Dates are cited as in the calendar in use at the time under discussion.

reflected most clearly in Lenin's avowal of 'revolutionary defeatism' - the doctrine calling for Russia's defeat on the ground that its ruling class had dragged the people into a war 'between the biggest slave-holders for the maintenance and consolidation of slavery'.² Whereas nationalist militarism was the very means of survival for the Jacobins; the Bolsheviks came to power on a wave of war-weariness, calls to exit from the war, and a refusal of the patriotism that in 1914, had led so many socialists to forget their internationalist convictions and join hands with 'their' capitalists.

The Russian Revolution is not synonymous with the Bolshevik Revolution. The overthrow of Tsarism was not the work of the Bolshevik Party, although various socialist cadres were active during the events. Moreover, if the assumption of power by the Second Congress of Soviets in October was unavoidable it was not destined to be pre-empted by the Bolshevik-Left SR seizure of power.³ The changes that occurred in Russia were latent in the complex struggles between March and October 1917, foreshadowed in the years prior to the outbreak of world war, and manifest most clearly in the practice of Bolshevism in power during the civil war and after.

As the revolutionary regimes of France and Russia came to be identified with state power in a bounded area, so also did the 'national' element gain over the universalist, international one. In both upheavals the line dividing internal and external enemies tended to disappear. The French revolution provoked a counter-revolutionary coalition. And the civil war that broke out in Russia was joined by a eleven-member coalition including Britain, France, Japan and the USA, bent upon crushing the communist regime, which for its part proclaimed its support for insurrectionary forces in Europe and the world.

Authority and Legitimation: Thus despite their marked differences, there was a resonance between Jacobinism and Bolshevism. In fact, Lenin directly identified the

² Lenin, *CW*, vol 21, p 302

³ Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin, vol 1: Paradoxes of Power 1878-1928*; Allen Lane, London 2014; p 223

Bolsheviks with the Jacobin regime.⁴ To examine what this might mean, we could reflect upon the assumptions at the heart of democratic politics since 1789. The first relates to state legitimacy; the second to the paradoxical emergence of militarized, rank-ordered societies in the wake of an egalitarian movement. The revolutionary era inaugurated in 1789 carried the promise of a rationalist utopia; but soon appeared to foreshadow terror and eternal warfare. This dichotomy was rooted in the crisis of legitimacy arising out of the execution of the monarch and the challenge to the doctrine of Divine Right.

The problem of legitimization is at the heart of the major political confrontations of our time. For Lenin, it appeared to have been decisively resolved by the appearance of soviets in 1917. His utterances that year referred repeatedly to the historic destiny of these institutions. Throughout 1917, the Bolshevik slogans *peace, land, bread* and *immediate convocation of the Constituent Assembly* were combined with *all power to the soviets*. Yet by December the status of the soviets had become a crucial component of the Leninist argument for the *denial* of legitimacy to the Constituent Assembly.⁵

For their part, proponents of the Assembly were justified in placing the utmost importance to its work, because the demand for such an assembly had been the unifying slogan of the entire Russian democracy. After October 25 however, the profound political tension between soviet power and party control rapidly became evident. And this was due to Lenin's identification of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" with the untrammelled domination of his party.

The revolutionary order subsumed theological truth by a modern version of belief (ideology); and bypassed the issue of legitimacy by subjugating it to the dogma of historical 'law' or necessity. In the twentieth century, we enter the age of what Carl Schmitt in 1922 theorized as 'political theology'.⁶ In 1923, Schmitt claimed that

⁴ Can "Jacobinism" frighten the working class? Lenin, *CW*, vol 25, p 121

⁵ Alexander Rabinowitch; *The Bolsheviks in Power: First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*; Indiana University Press; Bloomington 2007; p 91

⁶ The terms *decisionism* and *political theology* were used in 1922 by Carl Schmitt in *Political Theology: Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*; MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass; 1985. He wrote, 'The classical representative of the decisionist type... is Thomas Hobbes. The peculiar nature of this type explains why it,

‘acclamation’ was superior to voting procedures, and that Italian fascism and Soviet Bolshevism ‘were certainly anti-liberal but not necessarily antidemocratic.’⁷ The Marxist adherents of decisionism were unperturbed by the paradox that a politics founded upon the dogma of historical necessity was shown to have depended for its success upon contingency and individual will. These two philosophical moves were of profound significance. Practically speaking, Lenin was the first successful decisionist of the twentieth century.

Two of Marx’s observations on the history of ideas are especially relevant to the world-changing events of the twentieth century. The first was his warning that materialism could end up as an elitist doctrine: ‘The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing... forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. *Hence this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society*’.⁸ The second was his reference to feudal socialism in the Communist Manifesto: ‘The aristocracy took their revenge by singing lampoons on their new master, and whispering in his ears sinister prophecies of coming catastrophe. In this way arose feudal Socialism, half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future..’⁹

The downfall of monarchies required alternative theories of sovereignty. The debates around this problem inaugurated the age of Ideology. Two major strains arose in nineteenth century politics - social democracy and reactionary nostalgia. The first led to the emergence of socialism and communism. The second appeared as conservative populism, and represented aristocratic and clerical reactions to industrial society. It was manifest in forms as varied as Slavophilia, anti-Semitism and romanticised nationalism.

and not the other type, discovered the classic formulation of the antithesis: *auctoritas, non veritas facit legem;*’ (authority, not truth, makes law); p. 33

⁷Carl Schmitt; *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*; MIT Press; Cambridge, Mass.; 2000; p 16

⁸Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach; Marx & Engels, *Selected Works*; vol 1, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973; p 13. Hereafter MESW (Emphasis added).

⁹MESW vol 1; p 128-129

And the history of ideas and ideologies is marked by ideological osmosis. This is evident in the interactions of Narodism and socialism in Russia; and those between romanticism and the cult of insurrection in early twentieth century Europe.

Nineteenth century social-democracy tended towards a ‘scientific socialist’ doctrine, with an emphasis on ‘law’-governed historical change. This world-view was thrown in disarray by the Great War of 1914-1918. European socialism fought for democracy; but was spilt after 1917, when it slid under the domination of technocratic elites that ruled (or sought to rule) in the name of historical law. The monarchist and clerical reaction on the other hand, faced with the inevitability of democratic upheavals and enraged by Bolshevism, used the ruins of war to radicalise conservatism in the name of the Nation.

After the Great War, two versions of social-democracy emerged – an insurrectionary one, and a moderate one. Both were attempts at stabilising chaotic and disturbed post-war societies. German democracy proved incapable of resisting the Nazi drive towards militarism and annihilation. But in each case the decisionist aspect of sovereignty was camouflaged via a reference to the legitimate expression of popular will – in Russia as represented by the soviets; in Germany as the will of the Nation, manifested through elections. And both soviets and Reichstag were swiftly rendered inconsequential.

Bolshevism and Leninism: The notion of the Communist Party as the only legitimate vehicle of revolutionary knowledge is directly Lenin’s. Pavel Axelrod, who along with Georgi Plekhanov and Vera Zasulich was a pioneer of Russian Marxism, called this theory ‘an organizational utopia of a theocratic character.’¹⁰ Truth was relative to class-orientation, Marxism was the truth of History; and he, Lenin, possessed the correct understanding of Marxism. Lenin does not appear to have distinguished theory from ideology. His approach toward ‘socialist consciousness’ - which he insisted could only be introduced into the ranks of the working class from ‘outside’, was a view

¹⁰ Andrzej Walicki; *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: the Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia*; Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995; p 310

he shared with leading Marxists of his time.¹¹ However, there were distinct differences between his view and that of Kautsky and Plekhanov - the latter declared Lenin's position to be non-Marxist.¹² Marx and Engels had proclaimed that 'the Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement'.¹³ At the foundation of the International Working Men's Association in 1864, they formulated the principle 'The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself; and insisted that the task of the International was 'to combine and generalize the spontaneous movements of the working classes, but not to dictate or impose any doctrinaire system whatever.'¹⁴

Lenin's theory did not substitute intellectuals for workers, nor was the notion of correct ideas entering the workers' movement 'from without' exclusively his. Lenin's attacks on spontaneity, his ambivalence toward 'the elemental destructive force of the masses', and his belief that every movement and political idea had a class character, were directly linked to the idea that 'left to itself' the working class movement would remain a bourgeois movement. This was the novelty of his position: *the class composition of the labour movement had no bearing on its class character*:

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the only choice is - either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course..., to belittle the socialist ideology in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree means to strengthen bourgeois ideology... the *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology... for the

¹¹ 'We have said that there could not have been Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without...' Lenin, *CW*, vol 5, p 375

¹² Walicki; *Marxism and the Leap*; p. 310

¹³ MESW vol 1; p 119

¹⁴ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Lawrence & Wishart Electric Book; vol 20; pp 14; 190. Hereafter *MECW*

spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism... and trade-unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie... the task of Social-Democracy, is *to combat spontaneity*, to divert the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy.¹⁵

It followed that what distinguished a truly revolutionary movement was whether or not it possessed the correct ideology – of which the revolutionary party was the sole repository. Individuals, parties and factions with positions different from Lenin's were not merely wrong, but representatives of hostile class interests; 'objectively' treacherous, and deserving of abusive polemic. His stance on truth was factional - an approach which would have tragic consequences during 1920-22, when many Russian workers protested 'ideological enslavement' and demanded democratic elections to the soviets, for which they were deemed counter-revolutionaries. This was a logical outcome of his identification of proletarian dictatorship with Bolshevik domination: 'Our Party, like any other political party, is striving after political domination *for itself*. Our aim is the dictatorship of the revolutionary proletariat.'¹⁶

Lenin's theory of knowledge led to apparently contradictory positions. The first was that truth is what the Party says it is. Where there are several workers' parties, this leads to a multiplicity resolvable only by force. The other consequence is a rejection of the very notion of objective reality. In either case there remain no independent criteria for judging the veracity of any statement at all, whether descriptive or analytical, because the selection of such criteria will also involve class bias. The epistemology of Marxism-Leninism implies the political abolition of truth. In Alexandre Koyre's words:

¹⁵ Lenin, *CW*, vol 5, p 384

¹⁶ Lenin, *CW*, vol 25, p 310. See also Leszek Kolakowski; *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution* vol II; Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978, pp 384-398; and Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap* op cit; pp 293-302

The official philosophies of the totalitarian regimes unanimously brand as nonsensical the idea that there exists a single objective truth valid for everybody. The criterion of “truth,” they say, is not agreement with reality, but agreement with the spirit of a race or nation or class - that is, racial, national or utilitarian. Pushing to their limits the biological, pragmatist, activist theories of truth, the official philosophies of the totalitarian regimes deny the inherent value of thought. For them thought is not a light but a weapon: its function, they say, is not to discover reality as it is, but to change and transform it with the purpose of leading us towards what is not.¹⁷

Lenin’s focus on Russian possibilities also throws light on his decisionist turn. As Walicki puts it: ‘His early works throw much light on his vindication of the great role of the “subjective factor” - revolutionary consciousness and organized will - in the process of history, on his deep concern with the agrarian question, on his refusal to treat peasants as a “reactionary mass”..¹⁸ These aspects of Lenin’s ideology became stark in 1917.

Political power and the law: The tensions between Plekhanov and Lenin on law and ‘bourgeois democracy’, were portentous, and lay at the root of the irreparable rupture within social democracy in 1917.¹⁹ Plekhanov’s instincts were those of a Russian Westerniser, which melded well with a view of progress wherein a bourgeois republic was on the agenda of Russia’s development. There was indeed a strong Russian tradition of censure of law, popular among Narodniks and social-democrats; but among the latter

¹⁷ Alexandre Koyre, *The Political Function of the Modern Lie*; Contemporary Jewish Record, Vol. VIII – 1945; New York, N. Y.

¹⁸ Andrzej Walicki; Russian Social Thought: An Introduction to the Intellectual History of Nineteenth-Century Russia; *The Russian Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Jan., 1977), p 45

¹⁹ See Andrzej Walicki; *The Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism*; University of Notre Dame Press; Notre Dame; 1992; pp 82-104

there was also recognition of the inherent value for workers of so-called ‘bourgeois freedom.’ For Plekhanov, law was an instrument of class dictatorship - but dictatorship here meant social domination, not a state untrammelled by law.²⁰ Marx wanted popular sovereignty to extend to the economic sphere; but ‘by the *dictatorship of the proletariat* he meant the hegemonic power of the working class as a whole, taking for granted the rights of free expression and association for the entire population.’ There are ambivalences in Marx, but the history of the International Working Men’s Association, in which doctrinal differences were freely held, shows that for him working class politics was not a domain of doctrinal homogeneity or enforced unity.²¹

Lenin remained within the dominant Russian tradition of legal nihilism, oscillating between anarchist and Jacobin inclinations. The first is exemplified by his argument for direct democracy in *The State and Revolution* (August 1917); the second by his focus (April 1918) on combating ‘petty-bourgeois anarchy’ via ‘the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals.’ These apparently opposing positions were compatible with his belief that ‘the scientific term “dictatorship” means nothing more nor less than authority untrammelled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatever, and based directly on force. The term “dictatorship” has no other meaning but this.’²² These ideas could justify spontaneous popular actions as well as the work of the political police. For Lenin, law was an instrument of the state, which in turn was an instrument of class power. In essence, law was command, and ‘it is we who are the state’. In a secret letter to the Commissar for Justice Kursky in February 1922, he stated that:

We do not recognize anything ‘private’, and regard *everything* in the economic sphere as falling under *public* and not *private* law. We allow only state

²⁰ However, Plekhanov himself had grounded socialist legitimacy on ‘a faultless understanding of historical necessity’, which ‘could not be combined with a genuine commitment to the rule of law or of popular sovereignty.’ See Walicki *Legal Philosophies*; p 91

²¹ Walicki; *Marxism and the Leap*; p. 92

²² Lenin, *CW*, vol 10, p 246 (March 28, 1906), vol 31, p 353

capitalism, and as has been said, it is we who are the state. Hence, the task is to extend the right of the state to annul 'private' contracts; to apply to 'civil legal relations' not the *corpus juris Romani* but *our revolutionary concept of law*..²³

The course of events: Bolsheviks' relation to the Russian working class relates in turn to an understanding of the soviets. Russia's labour force, minuscule in proportion to the population, was concentrated in industrial centres with modern work-processes. Yet it enjoyed no rights under the Tsarist autocracy. And although there were several interests that demanded democracy, none was so deeply invested in democratic rights as the working class. The first soviet emerged in May 1905, amidst the strike wave during the Russo-Japanese war. It originated as a strike committee in the town of Ivanovo-Vozhnezhensk and lasted till July, during which time it became the voice of the entire labour force in the city, and inspired similar formations elsewhere. These soviets left a lasting impression. Later that year, fresh mass strikes led again to the formation of soviets which made demands on behalf of Russian democracy and an end to the war.

The St Petersburg soviet of October 1905 originated in an assembly of workers deputies to an official inquiry about workers demands. It began as a strike committee and admitted representatives of the major socialist parties. On October 17 it named itself *Sovet rabochich deputatov* or Council of Workers Deputies and launched a newspaper, *Izvestija*.²⁴ St Petersburg's Bolsheviks were favourably inclined while it was a strike committee; but became hostile when it emerged as an instrument of political leadership. In some places Bolsheviks demanded support for their party programme. At first Lenin took the view that the soviet was the nucleus of a provisional revolutionary government, itself an expression of a class alliance. Upon a brief return to Russia however, he expressed his suspicions of the soviet's non-partisan nature and stated: 'The Soviet of Workers' Deputies is not a labour parliament and not an organ of proletarian self-

²³ Lenin, *CW* vol 36, pp 562-563

²⁴ Oskar Anweiler; *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905-1921*; Pantheon Books, New York, 1974; pp 37-64

government, nor an organ of self-government at all, but a fighting organisation for the achievement of definite aims.' He even wrote an entire piece on non-party revolutionism.²⁵

More than a million workers had joined the 1905 strike wave. The Tsar made a few concessions to democratic governance, but the government also launched a repressive campaign that resulted in hundreds of deaths; and up to 70,000 arrests. 300,000 troops were mobilized to quell a movement that, if conceded to, might have saved the country from future upheavals.²⁶ From then on, the events of 1905 came to be known as the dress-rehearsal for the revolution 1917.

1917: Russia shakes the world: The Russian Revolution began on International Women's Day 1917, in the midst of a world war which had cost Russia 2 million dead and 2.5 million wounded. It was rooted in the yearning for popular democracy and an opposition to the war. Neither Bolshevism nor its development may be understood outside of these salient facts. The October revolution was actually a Bolshevik-Left Socialist Revolutionary (henceforth Left SR) seizure of power. The soviet insurrectionary majority was a combination of these two parties, and could not have claimed any legitimacy without this combination.

The provisional government which emerged after the Tsar's abdication was led by the Right Socialist Revolutionary (SR) Alexander Kerenski, who was also a member of the soviet. The resurgent soviet of soldiers and workers, issued its famous Order Number 1, assuming direct authority over the garrison. Thus began the period of dual power, with a government headed by constitutional democrats (Kadets) and moderate social democrats; co-existent with emergent popular institutions. The government conceded what had already been taken, but postponed land distribution and arrangements for a new constitution.

²⁵ Lenin, CW, vol 10, p 72. See also: The socialist party and non-party revolutionism, pp 75-82. For debates on the 1905 soviets, see Anweiler; *The Soviets*; pp 75-86

²⁶ Kotkin, op cit. *Stalin*; p 84-87

Lenin arrived on April 3. His 'April theses' presented the next day, were a political thunderclap. He announced the soviets to be the germ of a new era and the Russian revolution to be the harbinger of the 'worldwide socialist revolution'. Senior soviet leaders present described him as a contender for the throne of Bakunin, and his speech as 'the ravings of a madman'.²⁷ His earliest adherent was the Kronstadt soviet, which announced itself as a soviet republic in May.²⁸ The norms of the soviets permitted electoral recall and led to rapid radicalization. However, the first All Russia Congress of Soviets in June rejected the idea of exclusive soviet power.²⁹ Lenin told its delegates that they were 'the new type of "government" created by the revolution, examples of which can be found only at a time of greatest revolutionary upsurge... The Soviets are an institution which does not exist in any ordinary bourgeois-parliamentary state and cannot exist side by side with a bourgeois government.'³⁰

Lenin declared his party was ready to assume full power. Withdrawal from the war and a peace without annexations were central to his argument. Significantly, he used both 'government' and 'state' to describe the soviet. Disputes about the 'stage' of the revolution presume that the only alternatives were Bolshevik dictatorship versus overthrow of the soviets. However the situation is best described as follows:

The system of "diarchy" could not endure. The Bolsheviks were absolutely correct in demanding a radical solution of the problem: 'All power to the soviets.' But here a paradox appeared: the soviets did not want sole power. Although they had in fact ruled in some places, the moderate socialist majority firmly turned against the Bolshevik slogan, arguing that: 1) The soviets are class organizations, embracing only part of the population. Should soviet rule be established, other

²⁷ N.N. Sukhanov; *The Russian Revolution, 1917: A Personal Record*; Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984; pp 273, 286-7

²⁸ Anweiler; *The Soviets*; pp 138

²⁹ Anweiler; *The Soviets*; pp 140

³⁰ Lenin, *CW*, v 25 p 18

strata—especially the bourgeoisie, but also sections of the peasantry—would reject the revolution, and the proletariat, the nucleus of soviet power, would be isolated. 2) A soviet government could solve Russia's enormous problems no better than could a broadly based coalition government. Waging war, especially, required union of all national forces. 3) Establishment of soviet power would reinforce centrifugal tendencies inherent in local soviets, and thereby defeat unity.³¹

The Government's fresh military offensive in June failed; thereupon some Bolshevik units launched an armed demonstration between July 3 and 5. The soviet's Central Executive Committee (hereafter CEC) denounced this as an attempted putsch. On July 6 the War Minister Kerensky succeeded Prince Lvov as chairman of the Provisional Government, launched a wave of arrests and promoted Lavr Kornilov as Army Commander-in-Chief.

Lenin had defined the soviets as the highest form of democracy, but now refused to submit to the soviet majority. (He and other senior Bolsheviks went into hiding). He advocated dropping the slogan 'all power to the soviets' on the ground that they had become 'fig-leaves of counter-revolution'. At a Bolshevik conference in July; soviet power was *contra-posed* to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. The dissenters rejected Lenin's view that the class nature of the revolution had been altered. Stalin answered that 'the heart of the matter is not the institution, but which class will prevail in the institution.' The debate persisted into the Sixth Party Congress (July 26 to August 3). Stalin and Bubnov argued Lenin's position, which was: "The goal of the battle can only be the transfer of power to the proletariat, supported by the poor peasantry, for implementation of our party program." Strong voices warned of the party's isolation from the masses, who identified the revolution with the soviets. As a compromise the party called for 'dictatorship of the proletariat and poorer peasantry.'³²

³¹ Anweiler; *The Soviets*; pp 138 - 139

³² Anweiler; *The Soviets*; pp 168- 172

Lenin's utilitarian approach to the soviets had been his stance since 1905. He aimed at total power for his party, with or without the soviets. His ally Leon Trotsky who joined the party in July and was a crucial figure in the October insurrection, openly declared it to have been carried out 'under the slogan of defending the rights of the Congress of Soviets', and that:

The adaptation of the question of the seizure of power to the Second Soviet Congress did not involve any naive hopes that the congress itself could settle the question of power. Such fetishism of the soviet form was entirely alien to us.. All the necessary work for the conquest of power, not only the political but also the organizational and military-technical work for the seizure of power, went on at full speed. But the legal cover for all this work was always provided by an invariable reference to the coming congress... These people seriously believed that we were only concerned with soviet parliamentarism. ³³

There were 570 workers strikes in Russia between March and October 1917. These have either been passed over as part of the general unrest or an expression of the growing popularity of the Bolsheviks. The over-riding focus on the insurrection has led to an elision of the immense debate that unfolded within the working class. Koenker and Rosenberg's study of strikes has highlighted the growth of non-partisan class consciousness among Russian workers in 1917. During this period, whereas the allegiance of business leaders shifted towards conservative positions; factory committees and unions did not always encourage militancy, out of concern for the reputation of the soviet movement. This in turn resulted in recalls of deputies and further radicalization of the soviet.³⁴

Bolshevik membership rose from 80,000 to 240,000 between April and August 1917. Factory committees that had emerged in the confrontation between labour and capital

³³ Leon Trotsky, *The Lessons of October*; 1924; Pioneer Publishers, New York, 1937; p 52

³⁴ Diane Koenker, and William Rosenberg; *Strikes and Revolution in Russia 1917*; Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989; p 5-8. Also see J.L.H. Keep, *The Russian Revolution: A Study in mass mobilization*; W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1976; pp 288-305

and 'become footholds for the Bolsheviks sooner than the workers and soldiers councils', were now envisaged as alternative sites for generating radical demands. By calling for 'workers' control', the party pitted the committees against moderate socialists in the trade unions. It also gained popularity in soldiers' committees and soviets.³⁵ This indicated the popularity of the demands for peace and a new constitution. There was turmoil among the Mensheviks and SR's, especially as both parties had anti-war groups within their ranks.

The SR's underwent a de-facto split in May 1917. Its left-wing dominated Petrograd, and wanted an 'all Socialist government' based upon the soviets as the solution to Russia's crisis. Left SR cadres were popular in frontline committees, in the Kronstadt soviet uprising, and in the Railway Workers Union. After the 'July days' they came out in favour of soviet power.³⁶

On August 27 Kornilov advanced on Petrograd with frontline troops. Sukhanov called it 'the attempted coup of generals and financiers', and was convinced that Kerensky was an accomplice, albeit one who was outmaneuvered by events. Instead of being the instrument of counter-revolution, the Army became the foundation for insurrection. All soviet forces joined hands, and a committee against counter-revolution was set up. It was renamed the Military Revolutionary Committee and played a major role in October. Bolshevik influence expanded rapidly, demolishing Lenin's position that the soviet had become a 'fig-leaf for counter-revolution.'³⁷

The Bolsheviks seize power: The insurrection proceeded on the night of October 24, and was presented to the Second All Russian Congress of Soviets as a fait-accompli. The decision to act *on behalf of* the Congress had been taken by the Bolshevik Central

³⁵ Anweiler; *The Soviets*; pp 125-127; 293

³⁶ Michael Melancon, *The Left Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolshevik Uprising*; in V. Brovkin (ed); *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil Wars*; Yale University Press, New Haven, 1997

³⁷ Sukhanov; *The Russian Revolution*; pp 500 – 513; Kotkin, *Stalin, vol 1*; pp 205-211

Committee on October 10, in a vote of 10 to 2.³⁸ The vacillation on war and the Constituent Assembly by the liberal-cum-moderate socialist alliance in Government and the Soviet CEC ensured the growth of the radical left. The demand for replacement of the Provisional Government was a popular one. But the radicals were divided between those who wished for a socialist coalition which would hold the Constituent Assembly elections and lay the ground for a new constitution; and those pushing for a revolution that would spark off uprisings in Europe. Moderate Bolsheviks favoured the first perspective. The climate was muddied by the pre-emptive seizure of power; the boycott of the Congress by Mensheviks and Right SR's and the Bolshevik's initial military successes.³⁹ Anweiler sums up the situation as follows:

The Bolshevik insurrection, cloaked by soviet legality and nominal soviet power, was carried out behind the back of most soviets. Usurpation of power just before convocation of the highest soviet organ implied the Bolsheviks' break with soviet democracy. This fusion of new soviet power and the Bolshevik insurrection proved disastrous for the soviets themselves; after this, they were merely servants of the party and a cover-up for Bolshevik dictatorship - a role they never had contemplated.... On the very day of their greatest triumph the soviets' decline began, and the banner... 'All power to the soviets' soon proved itself a bitter illusion.⁴⁰

Many soviets had not sent delegates to Petrograd. 402 workers and soldiers' soviets were represented from a total of about 900 soviets in Russia. Among the roughly 650 delegates, the Bolsheviks claimed 390; with Left SR's the next strongest group.⁴¹ The new CEC was dominated by Bolsheviks and Left SRs. However the Council of Peoples' Commissars (Sovnarkom) was wholly Bolshevik. Numerous unions and local soviets

³⁸ Kotkin, op cit. *Stalin*; p 214-218

³⁹ Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; p 13

⁴⁰ Anweiler; *The Soviets*; pp 193

⁴¹ Anweiler; *The Soviets*; pp 193-194. Kotkin's figures are 1429 soviets, including 455 peasant soviets. op cit, p 217

opposed the new dispensation, including the powerful Union of Railway Workers (Vikzhel), which demanded a socialist coalition. An inter-party conference was held under this pressure – which failed due to intransigent demands by the Mensheviks and Lenin's hostility to a coalition. There were also dissenting Bolshevik voices.⁴² Vikzhel threatened a railway strike unless warring socialists stopped fighting. Its demand for a government on a broad socialist basis was echoed by the Petrograd Soviet of Peasants' Deputies, the Petrograd Trade Union Council and the Central Soviet of Factory-Shop Committees, in which Bolsheviks had majorities.⁴³

Soon after October 25, the Right SR's, Kadets, Mensheviks and other groups within the Petrograd City Duma established the All-Russian Committee for Salvation of the Homeland and the Revolution (ACS). A battle unfolded for state legitimacy. Skirmishes in Petrograd and Moscow resulted in hundreds of deaths.⁴⁴ Government officials struck work; and many newspapers recognized the ACS. The Sovnarkom denounced them as counter-revolutionary; and Lenin decreed the closure of oppositional newspapers. On November 4, there was a stormy debate in the CEC on press censorship.⁴⁵ The minutes of the fifth session include the Left SR statement that:

The struggle for press freedom has always been closely bound up with the struggle for socialism... The resolution on the press... is a clear and unambiguous expression of... a system of political terror and for unleashing civil war. The SR fraction... has no desire to bear any responsibility for this system of terror, ruinous for the revolution, and therefore withdraws all its representatives from the Military Revolutionary Committee, the staff, and all responsible posts...

⁴² Anweiler; *The Soviets*; pp 194-5; John L. H. Keep, (ed) *The Debate on Soviet Power: Minutes of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets, Second Convocation, October 1917-January 1918*. Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1979; pp 268-269; 275-281

⁴³ Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; p 26

⁴⁴ Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; pp 23, 24, 71

⁴⁵ Keep, (ed) *Debate on Soviet Power*; pp 77-79

Eleven Bolshevik members of Sovnarkom sided with the Left SR's; and four of them resigned their posts. Viktor Nogin, Commissar for Trade and Industry read out their 'urgent' statement:

It is vital to form a socialist government from all parties represented in the soviets. Only such a government can seal the heroic struggle of the working class and revolutionary army... We consider that a purely Bolshevik government has no choice but to maintain itself by political terror... We cannot follow this course which will lead to the proletarian mass organizations becoming estranged from those who direct our political affairs, to the establishment of an irresponsible government and to the annihilation of the revolution and the country. We cannot bear responsibility for such a policy, and therefore... resign from our posts..⁴⁶

A Left SR statement was then read out for 'the Chairman of the CPC (Sovnarkom), Ulyanov-Lenin':

At the Second Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies it was laid down that the CEC is the supreme organ to which the government is wholly responsible. However, in the last few days the government has published a number of decrees which have not been discussed or approved by the CEC. By this procedure the government has taken measures which have *de-facto* annulled fundamental civil liberties. We therefore ask the chairman of the CPC: 1. On what grounds were drafts of [these] decrees and other measures not submitted for examination to the CEC? 2. Does the government now intend to desist from the arbitrary and completely impermissible practice it has established of ruling by decree? ⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Keep, (ed) *Debate on Soviet Power*; pp 77-78. Signed by Nogin, Rykov, Milyutin, Teodorovich; and endorsed by Ryazanov; Derbyshev (commissar of press affairs); Arbuzov, Yurenev, (commissar of Red Guards); Fedorov and Larin. Shlyapnikov, commissar of labour, adhered to it but continued in his position

⁴⁷ Keep, (ed) *Debate on Soviet Power*; pp 78-79. Signed by Kareljin, Spiro, Shreyder, Alexandrevich-Dmitriyevsky, Balashev, Bukhartsev, Proshyan, Zak and Gr. Zaks

Despite repeated protests against ‘the practice of determining laws in secret, and decreeing them autocratically,’ about 60 newspapers were shut down. Lenin also got the CEC to nullify its oversight over Sovnarkom, in violation of a norm subordinating the government to the CEC.⁴⁸ Among Lenin’s Bolshevik critics was David Riazanov, chairman of the Petrograd Trade Union Council, who represented 450,000 unionized workers. On November 1, he made a forceful plea for compromise: ‘without the Left SRs..we will be faced with the fact that we tricked the masses, having promised them a Soviet government... agreement is a necessity.’⁴⁹

Peasant soviets were not represented in the Second ARC on October 25, and had refused to recognize the new power.⁵⁰ But on November 11 the CEC of the Second All-Russian Congress of Peasants’ Deputies decided to merge with that of workers and soldiers. On November 15, the Left SR Maria Spiridinova addressed the first joint session of the merged CEC’s calling for international peasant-worker solidarity against war, imperialism and finance capitalism. Left SR hostility had been softened by Lenin’s decree on land and a draft constitution guaranteeing Sovnarkom’s accountability to the CEC. On December 9, eight Left SRs became commissars, including Shteinberg (justice) and Kolegaev (agriculture). Lenin had averted an anti-Bolshevik peasant united front. Early military successes, confusion amongst his opponents and retreat by his moderate comrades enabled him to control an evolving situation.⁵¹

The Constituent Assembly: Elections to the Constituent Assembly were conducted by an independent Election Board on November 14. Over 44 million voters voted by secret ballot. The SR’s popularity in the countryside gave it (along with other socialists)

⁴⁸ Keep, (ed) *Debate on Soviet Power*; p 81; Kotkin, op cit. *Stalin*; p 236-37

⁴⁹ Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; pp 36

⁵⁰ Anweiler; *The Soviets*; pp 204

⁵¹ Keep, (ed) *Debate on Soviet Power*; pp 131-132; Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; pp 84, 50-53

62 percent of the vote. The Bolsheviks obtained 24 percent, with a strong showing in Moscow and over 45 percent in Petrograd. They also obtained over 75 percent of soldiers' votes in Moscow and Petrograd. Lenin could now bank upon support for any future action. Of utmost significance was the fact that candidates' lists had been finalised prior to the formal SR split; and the Left SRs ended up with fewer seats than they expected.⁵² What did the elections show ? In Kotkin's words :

around half the former Russian empire voted for socialism but against Bolshevism: the electorate seemed to want people's power, land, and peace without Bolshevik manipulation. In another sense, however, the Bolsheviks had secured an electoral victory in the strategic center of the country... as well as among crucial armed constituencies... For Lenin, that was sufficient. Other parties and movements remained slow to take his full measure, and... this mass political power of Bolshevism... "Who cannot see that what we have is nothing like a 'Soviet' regime, but is instead a dictatorship of Lenin and Trotsky, and that their dictatorship relies on the bayonets of the soldiers and armed workers whom they have deceived", the Socialist Revolutionary Nikolai Sukhanov lamented in November 1917.... But it was not primarily deception.... Lenin's dictatorship shared with much of the mass a popular maximalism, an end to the war come what may, a willingness to see force used to "defend the revolution," and an unapologetic class warfare... Lenin drew strength from the popular radicalism. ⁵³

An All-Russian Union for Defense of the Constituent Assembly (UDCA) was formed on November 22. Bolsheviks debated the results; but along with the Left SR's were adamant that they would not allow the Assembly to redefine sovereign power. The confrontation intensified after Lenin's November 28 decree declaring the Kadets

⁵² Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; pp 68-71; Kotkin, op cit. *Stalin*; p 243-244

⁵³ Kotkin, op cit. *Stalin*; p 245

‘enemies of the people’ and authorising their arrest. Trotsky even threatened ‘our class enemies’ with the guillotine.⁵⁴

On December 7, just prior to the Left SR entry into government, Petrograd’s Military Revolutionary Committee (which had organized the insurrection) was dissolved and replaced by the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution, Speculation and Sabotage (Cheka). The date of its establishment prevented Left SR influence over it. The Cheka began arresting prominent SR and Menshevik members of the Constituent Assembly. Commissar for Justice Shteinberg demanded the Cheka be brought under his control. This happened, but only the day after the dissolution of the Assembly, an act that was supported by his party. Meanwhile the presence in the Assembly of elected Bolshevik moderates, including those who wanted the Assembly to be the arbiter of a future constitution, caused another crisis. Lenin’s *Theses on the Constituent Assembly* in mid-December showed that he would only allow it to proceed if it accepted soviet power as irrevocable.⁵⁵

On New Years’ day 1918, Lenin’s car was fired upon. There were no serious injuries, but the government held the Right SRs responsible, whose newspaper offices were raided. The Constituent Assembly was to meet on January 5; and the UDCA had announced a demonstration. On January 3, the Soviet CEC resolved to crush attempts to tamper with soviet power; and made military preparations to prevent demonstrations. The marchers on January 5 numbered in tens of thousands, and were mainly middle class, students and clerical workers. Red Guards shot at them with machine guns killing 21 persons, including a peasant deputy from Tambov. Workers at major Petrograd factories protested the killings.⁵⁶

Between 400 and 500 of 800 elected delegates attended the Assembly’s opening session. The SR majority was nearly double that of the Bolshevik and Left SR combined.

⁵⁴ Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; pp 55, 70-73; 76-78

⁵⁵ Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; pp 9, 23, 25, 45-47; 83-92, Lenin, CW; vol 26; pp 379-383

⁵⁶ Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; pp 98, 100, 106-109; Daniel Kaiser (ed); *The Workers’ Revolution in Russia, 1917: the view from below*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987; p 117

The Assembly rejected the Bolshevik motion to limit its own scope; after which the Bolsheviks and Left SR's walked out. After some hours a guard asked the delegates to vacate the premises. On January 6, when the delegates arrived to resume, the doors were locked. Russia's Constituent Assembly had met for a single day. The same day, in the Soviet CEC meeting, Lenin defended soviets as 'these mighty organizations, the like of which no revolution hitherto ever witnessed;' and 'bastions of the revolution of labour.' Riazanov protested the shooting and voted against the dissolution.⁵⁷

The implosion of borders and 'war communism' : The Constituent Assembly crisis concentrated the problems of revolutionary Russia. The crisis involved four inter-related issues: relations with the peasantry; working class dissatisfaction; state legitimacy and terror. The Petrograd events had accelerated the disintegration of the Tsarist Empire. The Baltic states; Finland; Poland; Ukraine and the Caucasus region splintered off and several provinces in European Russia declared their independence. Administration imploded and millions of peasants began seizing aristocratic lands. Factory committees took over management in order to keep production lines running.

Tsarist generals led by Kornilov formed the Don Cossack Volunteer Force. Czech POWs awaiting transportation to the Pacific rebelled. The royal family was killed on July 16-17. In November 1917 the Germans had accepted the Bolshevik offer of an armistice. After protracted negotiations and bitter conflict in the Bolshevik leadership throughout January 1918, the German army advanced unhindered into Ukraine in February. (February 1 had become February 14 in the new calendar). On February 23 Sovnarkom accepted German terms, which included relinquishing 1.3 million square miles of territory, and 50 million people. Allied naval forces sent to Archangel to stall the German advantage soon joined an all-out effort to overthrow Bolshevism. On February 26 Lenin ordered the capital to be shifted to Moscow; and in August, he agreed to an even more oppressive treaty, with secret clauses, as a supplementary to Brest.⁵⁸ On March 14 the Fourth All Russian Congress of Soviets met to ratify the Brest Litovsk

⁵⁷ Kotkin, op cit. *Stalin*; p 245-246; Keep, (ed) *Debate on Soviet Power*; pp 262-262

⁵⁸ Kotkin, op cit. *Stalin*; p 249-253; 255-259; 265; 283

treaty. It was ratified amidst accusations of Bolshevik treachery, but the Left SR's and Left communists withdrew from Sovnarkom.⁵⁹

Civil war became the occasion for the regime to launch a set of policies that came to be known as 'war communism'. The term is misleading, for although it was a reaction to economic break-down, it was also an imposition of policies deemed 'socialist'. These involved the nationalization of banks, a ban on private manufacture, state monopoly of trade, compulsory organization of producer and consumer communes, the replacement of the domestic family economy by joint catering, compulsory labour service, the seizure of grain surpluses, and the partial elimination of money. After the break with the Left SR's, there were efforts at establishing producers' co-operatives and collective farms in rural areas. All these policies were combined with terror and arbitrariness and were a mix of ultra-left utopian visions and state-capitalist centralization.⁶⁰

War communism also involved industrial authoritarianism. In March 1918, a decree on the centralization of Railroad Administration placed "dictatorial power" in the hands of single persons.⁶¹ Lenin had insisted that dictatorial authority was a political imperative for the working class. His favourite metaphors for the new society were *army*, *machine* and *orchestra*. Those resisting such regimentation were accused of 'the petit-bourgeois mind-set'.⁶² He continued: 'If we are not anarchists, we must admit that the state, that is, coercion, is necessary for the transition from capitalism to socialism... There is absolutely no contradiction in principle between Soviet (that is, socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals.' Large-scale machine industry was the foundation of socialism and required 'absolute and strict unity of will, which directs

⁵⁹ Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; 207

⁶⁰ See Alec Nove; *An Economic History of the USSR, 1917-91*; Penguin Books, London 1992; p 68; and Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap*; p. 360-361. See also Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24: Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite*; Routledge; London, (2008) Chapter 2

⁶¹ Daniel Kaiser (ed); *The Workers' Revolution in Russia*; op cit; pp 116

⁶² Claude Lefort; *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy*; Columbia University Press, New York, 1999; pp 62-63

the joint labours of thousands and tens of thousands of people... how can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one.⁶³ A few months later, he summarized the 'Immediate tasks of the Soviet Government':

take the most concrete example of state capitalism. Everybody knows what this example is. It is Germany. Here we have "the last word" in modern large-scale capitalist engineering and planned organisation... in place of the militarist, Junker, bourgeois, imperialist state put also a state... of a different class content - a Soviet state, that is, a proletarian state, and you will have the sum total of the conditions necessary for socialism... our task is to study the state capitalism of the Germans...and not shrink from adopting dictatorial methods to hasten the copying of it. Our task is to hasten this copying even more than Peter hastened the copying of Western culture by barbarian Russia, and we must not hesitate to use barbarous methods in fighting barbarism.⁶⁴

In Lefort's words, 'Once mass production became the principal objective of socialism, neither workers' conditions nor their worsening mattered very much... Recalcitrant and wayward workers proved to be political enemies as much as petit-bourgeois or small property owners... The image of the revolution concealed from Lenin the gestation of a new system of domination.'⁶⁵

By April 1918, 46 percent of Petrograd's workers were unemployed. Food shortages became acute and workers fled to the countryside. In May 1918, the CEC set up a Food Supply Army, and a war between town and country ensued.⁶⁶ Committees of the Village Poor were established to step up class struggle in the countryside. (They were abolished in a few months). In fact the Constitution of 1918 deprived wealthy peasants of voting

⁶³Lenin *CW*, v 27 p 268-269

⁶⁴ Lenin, *CW*, v 27 p 339-340

⁶⁵ Lefort; *Complications*; op cit; p 63

⁶⁶ Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; p. 224, 270; Kotkin, op cit. *Stalin*; p 298-300;

rights.⁶⁷ Peasant rebellion now merged into the civil war, spreading into the Volga basin, the Urals and Siberia; and later to Smolensk, Samar, Voronezh, Orel, Kursk, Novgorod, Kostroma, Moscow and Petrograd. The summer of 1918 saw 350 clashes in central Russia. Rebel armies remained active in 1920, and guerilla warfare in Tambov province continued till the summer of 1921.⁶⁸ Elections in city soviets in April-May in the Central Industrial Region, the Volga and Urals, resulted in SR and Menshevik victories –the regime dealt with this by dissolutions and repression.⁶⁹

In August 1918, Stalin reported on southern Russia: ‘the front line soldier, the ‘competent muzhik’ who in October fought for Soviet power, has now turned against it... he heartily detests the grain monopoly, the fixed prices, the requisitions, and the measures against bag-trading.’ Reporting to the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919, Lenin conceded “terrible errors” in the Bolsheviks approach to the peasantry. “Because of the inexperience of our workers, and the complexity of the problem, blows meant for kulaks struck the middle peasantry.”⁷⁰

There were two aspects to the agrarian revolution. First, it denoted an end to feudal landownership, and the revival of the village commune. The involvement of monarchists in the White Armies ensured that the peasants would oppose a return to the old order. On the other hand, they resented Sovnarkom’s intrusions and the food dictatorship. Bolshevism was absent in the rural areas, and by mid-1918 even the Left SRs were at war with Sovnarkom. The New Economic Policy signified the victory of the peasant rebellion, but the price was heavy. Although precise figures are lacking, there were about 10.5 million unnatural deaths in the civil war. ‘In a sense it was a continuation of the

⁶⁷ Taisia Osipova; Peasant Rebellions: Origin, Scope, Dynamics and Consequences; in Brovkin; *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society*; p. 156, 158

⁶⁸ Osipova; op cit, p. 166-172

⁶⁹ Scott Smith; The Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Dilemma of Civil War; in Brovkin; *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society*; pp 88

⁷⁰ J. V. Stalin, *Collected Works*; Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1952-55, Vol. 4 pp. 125-126; Rabinowitch, op cit, p 286

peasant revolution directed against the old regime and the new Socialist order. The peasant revolution brought the Communist dictatorship to the brink of catastrophe. It forced the Soviet regime to abandon social experiments in the countryside and to soften coercive methods of government.⁷¹

The police state: The tensions within Russian democracy had led to violent confrontations as early as November 1917. As we have seen, they kept gathering pace. In June 20, 1918, Volodarskii, commissar for press and propaganda was assassinated; and on 22 June the Petrograd Soviet resolved to 'liquidate' all white guardists.⁷² The Brest treaty and conflicts over grain had hardened Left SR animosity to the Bolsheviks. On July 6, 1918, two Left SR Chekists assassinated the German ambassador Count Mirbach; and arrested Felix Dzerzhinskii and Cheka's second-in-command. Only the intercession of a Left SR Chekist saved Dzerzhinskii's life. The Left SR's were now in a position to replicate the October coup, but failed. After bloody clashes, their top leaders were arrested and 200 of their cadre shot. The Left SR's had 'no worse prospects against Lenin and the Bolsheviks than Lenin had against Kerensky,' but lacked Lenin's will. Another decisive moment passed as the Bolshevik's strongest Left competitors self-destructed.⁷³

On August 30, Moisei Uritsky, head of the Petrograd Cheka was killed by a cadet. The same night a SR activist named Fanya Kaplan shot Lenin, inflicting serious injury. Soon afterwards, Zinoviev announced that the shooting of 500 hostages in Petrograd. Public executions of former Tsarist officials were staged. There were 6185 summary executions in 2 months in 1918, compared to 6321 death sentences under Tsarism between 1825-1917.⁷⁴

The Bolshevik leadership now perceived political opposition as their gravest foe. This

⁷¹ Osipova; op cit, Peasant Rebellions, p. 173

⁷² Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; pp 80; 97; 314, 326

⁷³ Kotkin, op cit. *Stalin*; pp 275-279

⁷⁴ Kotkin, op cit. *Stalin*; pp 284-287

became its chief ‘security’ focus. Their ‘extra-ordinary’ body was normalized, as were its powers. In February 1922, Cheka became the State Political Administration or (GPU). ‘The reformation of the Cheka into the GPU and the means by which the GPU retained and expanded its jurisdiction were an immensely important process. The adaptation of a wartime institution to “ordinary” circumstances reflected the civil-war mentality...’⁷⁵ On March 6, 1922 the GPU was declared to be ‘an institution with strictly centralized management’, with ‘the same rights as operating units of the Red Army’ and all its members considered to be ‘on active military duty’.⁷⁶ Speaking about education and culture in 1919, Lenin defended the Bolshevik aspiration towards total social control and the dictatorial methods required to achieve this:

When we are reproached with having established a dictatorship of one party and, as you have heard, a united socialist front is proposed, we say, “Yes, it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we shall not shift from that position because it is the party that has won, in the course of decades, the position of vanguard of the entire factory and industrial proletariat. This party had won that position even before the revolution of 1905.⁷⁷

Two years later, he instructed the commissar for Justice, D.I. Kursky:

The courts must not ban terror - to promise that would be deception or self-deception-but must formulate the motives underlying it, legalise it as a principle, plainly, without any make-believe or embellishment. It must be formulated in the broadest possible manner, for only revolutionary law and revolutionary

⁷⁵ Stuart Finkel; An Intensification of Vigilance: Recent Perspectives on the Institutional History of the Soviet Security Apparatus in the 1920s; *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol 5, No. 2, 2004, p. 302

⁷⁶ David Shearer and Vladimir Khaustov; *History of the Political Police and Security Organs USSR 1922–1953*; Yale University Press; New Haven; 2015; p 20, Statutes of the GPU

⁷⁷ Lenin, *CW*, vol. 29, p. 535

conscience can more or less widely determine the limits within which it should be applied’⁷⁸

Thus did the undisputed founder of the Soviet state unequivocally uphold terror as an instrument of state policy and one party dictatorship as a foundational principle

The working class fights for democracy: Petrograd’s workers had protested the January 5 firing at the venue of the Constituent Assembly. Soon afterwards, a Conference of Factory and Plant Representatives emerged in Petrograd and Moscow in January 1918, in an attempt at non-partisan labour representation. Fifteen major plants were represented at its first meeting in March. Food shortages, chaotic administration, the changing political climate in unions and co-operation with the Bolsheviks were discussed, and there were reports of dismay and demoralization. In May 1918, a wave of protests erupted after guards shot at protesting workers in Kolpino, near Petrograd. Many strikes had an explicitly anti-Bolshevik character and demanded civil liberties. By July, soviet elections were returning increasing numbers of Menshevik and SR delegates.⁷⁹

In the spring of 1918 there emerged an Extraordinary Assembly of Delegates from Petrograd Factories and Plants, ‘a citywide opposition movement of moderate socialists and unaffiliated factory workers that spread to other industrial areas.’⁸⁰ ‘War communism’ had immensely complicated working class lives. Red Army recruitment; compulsory labour mobilization, reduction of productivity, problems of material allocation were matched for importance by scarcity of food and clothing, and conflict over rationing, not least of it concerning the privileges of the party elite. In the aftermath of civil war, strikes took place over rationing and pay in Moscow region. By 1921, workers discontent was obvious. One example was the Moscow metalworkers’ conference in February, which alarmed the leadership, as the metalworkers had been

⁷⁸ Lenin, *CW*; Vol 33, p 358

⁷⁹ Daniel Kaiser (ed); *The Workers' Revolution in Russia*; op cit; pp 116-128

⁸⁰ Rabinowitch; *Bolsheviks in Power*; p 223

strong supporters of Bolshevism. Another was the political activity in 1921 of workers groups describing themselves as ‘non-partyist’.⁸¹

Alexandra Kollontai's pamphlet *The Workers' Opposition*, arguing for union control of the economy and the de-bureaucratisation of the party showed that proletarian discontent resonated with many Bolsheviks. It appeared in *Pravda* in January 1921, but was banned soon after.⁸² Some ‘civil war communists’ set up a Workers and Peasants Socialist Party, which was active between April-June 1921, and supported the demands of the Workers’ Opposition. It grew in popularity until Cheka crushed it. At the Tenth Congress of the RCP, Lenin denounced manifestations of ‘anarcho-syndicalist deviation’.⁸³ He demanded and obtained a ban on ‘factions’ within the Bolshevik Party, a means of legitimizing ideological conformity. Thereafter a purge of left-wing dissidents was launched.⁸⁴ Non-Party intellectuals were also targeted: in 1922, aside from GPU-conducted trials of SRs and clergymen, 217 ‘anti-soviet academicians were arrested in August and given a week to leave Russia. Trotsky and Stalin suggested that the intellectuals were fortunate to escape with their lives.⁸⁵

The Bolsheviks faced their most serious challenge in the midst of the Party Congress. On March 1, 1921, the General Meeting of the Baltic Fleet Ship Crews passed a 15 point resolution stating that ‘the present Soviets do not express the will of the workers and

⁸¹ Pirani, *Russian Revolution in Retreat* op cit; pp70-89; 91-114

⁸² Alexandra Kollontai, *The Workers' Opposition*,
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/workers-opposition/index.htm> (accessed October 21, 2017)

⁸³ Lenin, *CW*, v 23, p 242 , 246; Pirani, *Russian Revolution in Retreat* op cit; pp 116-129. There was also a wave of suicides among communists in 1921-22.

⁸⁴ Barbara Allen; *Alexander Shlyapnikov, 1885-1937: life of an old Bolshevik*; Brill; Leiden, 20015; pp 179-190

⁸⁵ Stuart Finkel; Purging the Public Intellectual: The 1922 Expulsions from Soviet Russia; *The Russian Review*, Vol. 62, No. 4

peasants', and demanding immediate new elections by secret ballot with full freedom of agitation; freedom of speech and press for workers and peasants, for Anarchists and Left Socialist parties; freedom of assembly for labor unions and peasant organizations; a non-partisan Conference of workers, soldiers and sailors by March 1921; the liberation of political prisoners of socialist parties and workers, peasants, soldiers and sailors imprisoned in connection with labor and peasant movements; a newly elected Commission to review the cases of those held in concentration camps; and freedom for 'individual small scale production by one's own efforts'.⁸⁶

Kronstadt was preceded by a massive strike movement in Moscow and Petrograd in February protesting lock-outs and loss of rations. The famous Putilov works shut down with 30,000 workers laid off. The rebels' demands were popular with factory workers and it was estimated that about 30 percent of Party members supported them with 40 percent neutral. The revolt was crushed with military force; and some 200 delegates to the Party Congress had to be drafted to fight. The Red Army lost 1200 dead.⁸⁷ As for the rebels, the American anarchist Alexander Berkman, present in Petrograd at the time, wrote in his diary:

March 6.-Today Kronstadt sent out by radio a statement of its position. It reads: *Our cause is just, we stand for the power of Soviets, not parties. We stand for freely elected representatives of the laboring masses. The substitute Soviets manipulated by the Communist Party have always been deaf to our needs and demands; the only reply we have ever received was shooting. Comrades! They deliberately pervert the truth and resort to most despicable defamation. In Kronstadt the whole power is exclusively in the hands of the revolutionary sailors, soldiers and workers-not with counter-revolutionists... Do not delay, Comrades!.. demand admission to Kronstadt for your delegates. Only they will tell you the whole truth and will expose the fiendish calumny about Finnish*

⁸⁶ Alexander Berkman; *Life of an Anarchist*; Seven Stories Press; New York, 2005, p 201-2

⁸⁷ Kotkin, op cit. *Stalin*; p 382-391; Pirani, *Russian Revolution in Retreat* op cit; 78, 85

bread and Entente offers. Long live the revolutionary proletariat and the peasantry! Long live the power of freely elected Soviets.

March 17 - Kronstadt has fallen today. Thousands of sailors and workers lie dead in its streets. Summary execution of prisoners and hostages continues.

March 18 - The victors are celebrating the anniversary of the Commune of 1871. Trotsky and Zinoviev denounce Thiers and Gallifet for the slaughter of the Paris rebels.⁸⁸

Was an alternative polity possible in 1921? Simon Pirani argues that opposition to the monopolization of power was widespread and the demand for renewal of the soviets was popular, but advocates of a “third revolution” were a tiny minority. ‘The movement’s uneven character, and the lack of unity between Kronshtadt and the other main urban centres, cast doubt on claims that a revolutionary challenge was made to Bolshevik rule.’⁸⁹ Notwithstanding this assessment, the early phase of NEP witnessed further industrial unrest in 1923. Pirani argues that a new form of social contract was forged - economic relief in return for political quiescence. ‘Working-class politics, as distinct from industrial relations, was further stultified. The ‘workers’ state’ had put working-class political dissent beyond the pale. Attempts to defend dissident communist workers’ leaders associated with the Workers Group won only limited support. Most workers began abstaining from politics, often declining either to respond to the Bolsheviks’ appeals for financial contributions or even to vote in soviet elections.’⁹⁰

Assessment: A century after 1917, we are faced with the still-emerging truth about Bolshevism, both in its initial phase and later, when the soviet polity emerged as a

⁸⁸ Berkman; *Life of an Anarchist*; op cit, p 201-2; 205

⁸⁹ Pirani, *Russian Revolution in Retreat* op cit; p 72

⁹⁰ Pirani, *Russian Revolution in Retreat* op cit; p 192. See Chapter 8; The social contract in practice: Workers in 1923

‘despotism without despots, democracy without citizens, capitalism without capitalists, a proletariat without a workers’ movement, and a state without a framework of laws and rights proper to it.’⁹¹ The historical record shows that these tendencies were present in its formative years. Conjectures are impossible to evaluate, but can help us think. A social-democratic coalition based on soviet power would not have removed the danger of civil war, but could have greatly reduced the intensity of the conflict.

The soviets were potentially a legitimising ground for a new constitution. Indeed, this was Lenin’s position before and after July 1917. It was his justification for the seizure of power as well as the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. But the conflation of “all power to the soviets” with “dictatorship of the proletariat” was a manoeuvre of grave and destructive significance. It was used to provide doctrinal justification for one-party rule and the fusion of state and party. The new state ended up lacking independent institutions and a functional civil society. At its heart lay an unresolved crisis of legitimacy. The lack of a theory of legitimacy in Marxism-Leninism - as an ideology of power - has pushed it toward a metaphysical stance wherein sovereignty is grounded not in human institutions, but in a dialectic of the cosmos; knowledge of which is the preserve of Marxist sages.

In his meditative essays on Bolshevism, Lefort defines law ‘as that which cannot be violated and as that which imposes itself absolutely’. He cites Hannah Arendt’s characterisation of ideology as a “stringent logicality as a guide to action” or “compulsory processes of deduction”. Some people draw benefits from their enslavement, and ‘among these benefits one must count the power won by self-righteous minds to pose as master thinkers facing a mass of ignorant or irresolute people’.⁹² If anything imposed itself absolutely upon Bolshevism, it was an idealised movement of History mediated through the mind of Lenin; an attempt to enforce the dream of the Pure Idea.

⁹¹ Lefort; *Complications*; p 186-187

⁹² Lefort; *Complications*; p 170-171

The totalitarian features of the 1930s inhered in the very notion of the Party as the sole representation of the workers' historical interest; and as the *single pole of legitimacy in the State*. This ideological axiom underlay the demise of the soviet, the repression of protesting workers, and the suppression of critical thought within and outside the Party. Bolshevism has remained the autocratic core in social-democracy ever since 1917. Even dissident communists struggled to acknowledge this bitter truth. As Lefort puts it:

Trotskyists, confronted by the spectacle of Stalinism, never understood that they were dealing with a regime irreducible to traditional categories. They denounced the formation of a bureaucratic stratum, without ceasing to believe that it constituted a transitory, super-structural phenomenon...Trotsky himself, at the end of his life, considered the hypothesis of the totalitarian state without understanding that Lenin and he had participated in its construction.⁹³

It is also true that the Russian Revolution as a whole, from the overthrow of Tsarism until and including Bolshevik ascendancy, was set in motion by the Russian people's opposition to war. The collapse of social-democracy in August 1914 and the betrayal of socialist pacifism by the Second International was described by Roman Rolland as 'the greatest catastrophe in human history, the ruin of our most sacred hopes for human fraternity.'⁹⁴ Had the opponents of Bolshevism taken steps to respect this opposition, the entire sequence of events would have been different. As it is, the early years of the revolution were mired in warfare and its effects. Millions had died in the Great War, an even greater number perished in the civil war from 1918-22. Neither communists nor communism were responsible for imperialism, colonialism and international war. Total war and total mobilisation are part and parcel of modern capitalist society.

⁹³ Cited in Lefort; *Complications*; p 69

⁹⁴ Cited in R. Craig Nation; *War on War: Lenin, the Zimmerwald Left, and the origins of communist internationalism*; Durham, 1989; p 5

For seventeen years from 1905, the Russian polity was soaked in blood and cruelty. The revolution was born and bred in the crucible of warfare. It is one of the most tragic ironies of modern history that a movement driven by massive disgust with war and militarism was overtaken by a series of events culminating in a violent ideological dictatorship directed - for the most part - at the Russian people. The aspirations of that time can neither be forgotten nor dismissed. But the only way the socialist vision may be revived is by speaking across state borders; and speaking truthfully about the Russian Revolution.

I dedicate this essay to the memory of the millions of Russian people, who - at monumental cost - fought for democracy during the First World War and valiantly defeated Nazism in the Second. Salute!

Dilip Simeon